

“Drowning in the rising tide of unaffordability”

Food bank usage doubles in Ontario in four years as Canadian corporate profits soar

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A group representing a network of more than 1,200 food banks and hunger-relief organizations recently published data revealing that food bank usage in Ontario, Canada’s most populous province, has more than doubled since 2019.

Between April 1, 2023 and March 31, 2024 a record 1,001,150 unique individuals visited a food bank to supplement their dietary shortfalls in the business and financial heart of the country. Over that time food banks were visited 7,689,580 times, an increase of 31 percent over 2022-2023, and 134 percent over 2019-2020.

Feed Ontario CEO Carolyn Stewart stated in a September news conference, “People in Ontario are drowning in the rising tide of unaffordability.” She added, “The cost of living has surged, and for too many people there’s simply no life raft in sight. Instead of being thrown a lifeline, more and more people are being pulled under, trapped in the cycle of poverty and living in circumstances that make it impossible to get their heads above water.”

The Feed Ontario report notes that 2023-2024 is the eighth consecutive year food bank use has risen in the province and that working people are among the fastest-rising groups accessing those services. “Unless we do something soon to address food insecurity and poverty needs in this province, they are going to continue to grow out of control,” Stewart said.

Noting that close to 70 percent of food banks in the Feed Ontario network are now reporting concerns about food shortages, Stewart said, “This is what happens when you rely on a system that’s meant to provide and deal with emergencies.” She added, “These programs are falling into disrepair. They have basically been ignored for a very long time.” Stewart also pointed out that while the need for donations is higher than ever, many former donors are now turning to food banks for support themselves.

Last year at this time, before the Thanksgiving holiday, the CBC reported that the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto invited in nearly 200 volunteers to help sort and pack donations for families in need. Daily Bread CEO Neil Hetherington explained that it had been another record year of demand, with more than 12,500 new people now relying on the food bank for the first time each month compared to 1,000 people before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the volunteers were Toronto Mayor Olivia Chow and Ontario Premier Doug Ford. Speaking to reporters, Chow said, without making any demands or commitments, “When I’m sorting, I get very grateful for your contribution. I also get really

angry and say ‘Well, you know what, [it] shouldn’t be like this,’” adding “Let’s be angry about the situation but remain hopeful we can make a difference.” As for the premier, he had little to offer beyond platitudes and some vague and unconvincing affordable housing goals, declaring, “It’s very tough right now. Times are tough.”

Several months later, the scene repeated itself for the Easter 2024 holiday in which Hetherington revealed further shocking news. In the month of February alone, the Daily Bread Food Bank had over 300,000 client visits at its 200-plus programs across Toronto. That represented a 40 percent increase from February 2023, and a 136 percent increase from the same month the year before.

Explaining that roughly one in 10 Torontonians were now relying on food banks, he said, “We surpassed a milestone we never thought was possible,” adding, “What’s new is that there are individuals who have an income, who are working, who are cobbling together two or three part-time jobs and they still can’t make it.”

Food insecurity in Ontario has been a chronic social blight, particularly since the end of the post-war economic boom in the late 1970s, which ushered in high unemployment, runaway inflation and crippling interest rates. The Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto was founded in 1983 in response to those devastating conditions, which left the vulnerable exposed in the face of government policy to lay the full force of austerity and deindustrialization on the backs of the working class and the poor.

Fifteen years later, ongoing austerity and handouts to big business by all levels of government had made food banks an accepted fact of life in Canada. In October 1998, we wrote:

Several reports over the past weeks have drawn attention to the growth of hunger and homelessness across Canada, and in Ontario in particular.

One such study conducted by the Canadian Association of Food Banks, called Hunger Count 1998, reveals that the number of people forced to use food banks has increased dramatically in the past several years. More than 700,000 people used one of 2,141 food banks last year in Canada, an increase of 5.4 percent over 1996.

More than a quarter century later, the total of 700,000 people in Canada as a whole who used food banks in 1998 is dwarfed by those relying on them in a single province in 2024.

While food banks were initially intended to provide short-term assistance during the devastation of the severe recession of the early 1980s, they have since become an entrenched part of the economic status quo. Public generosity and goodwill have worked to soften the impact of decades of government policy that amounted to austerity for the working class and unrestrained exploitation and profits for corporations and the rich.

This outrageous situation was compounded by the initial phase of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The New Democratic Party- and trade union-supported Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau funnelled \$650 billion to the banks and big business, literally overnight, while placing workers who had lost their income during the shutdowns on rations with inadequate temporary benefits. Food bank use skyrocketed and the trend has not slowed since.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in April 2020:

The deep-seated socio-economic hardships brought to the fore by the COVID-19 pandemic are the product of the decades-long assault big business and its hirelings in all the establishment parties, from the avowedly pro-big business Conservatives to the ostensibly “left” NDP, have mounted.

Public services, like health care, and social protections, like minimum wages and unemployment insurance, have been shredded and workers’ living standards gutted in endless rounds of government austerity and employer drives for increased “competitiveness”—i.e., investor profit.

The devastation of working class living standards produced by these policies, supported by the entire political establishment and reinforced by the union bureaucracy’s suppression of the class struggle, goes hand in hand with a dramatic growth in corporate profits and investor wealth. A report from February of this year by the Centre for Future Work think tank stated:

Year-end data from Statistics Canada show that corporate profits in Canada remained historically high in Canada in 2023, despite the stalling of economic growth, rising unemployment, and stagnating consumer demand. Total after-tax corporate profits equaled \$577 billion for the year, down 3% from record 2022 levels—but still over \$200 billion (or 55%) higher than in 2019, the last year before the COVID pandemic.

The report specifically contradicts the pleas of innocence from food retail executives that their operations are not at least partially to blame for increasing food insecurity across the country.

The new Statistics Canada data confirm once again that profit margins in the food retail industry (dominated by the five largest chains) have in fact increased, far above pre-pandemic norms. The average food retail profit margin for 2023 increased by 20 basis points (0.2 percentage points) from 2022.

Food retail margins have increased steadily since the onset of the COVID pandemic; the strong margins generated in 2023 have reinforced that trend. Current margins are more than twice as high as typical margins earned in the years before the pandemic.

A key factor in the massive transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top contained within these figures is the trade union bureaucracy, which has been a major backer of the Trudeau federal government over the past nine years as it has enforced austerity to pay for imperialist war around the world. The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), its various affiliates—including the United Steelworkers, CUPE, OPSEU and the teacher unions—and Unifor, claimed that they could demand progressive policies from successive provincial Liberal governments through pressure and working together. That strategy merely achieved the desired effect of maintaining the perks and privileges of the union bureaucracy while keeping a lid on the class struggle.

Since 2018, when the hard-right Ontario government of Doug Ford (who recently publicly accused the poor of being lazy) was first elected, the unions frequently vowed to fight his sweeping pro-business agenda. In fact, the unions have strangled workers’ struggles whenever they have threatened to develop into a direct confrontation with Ford in Ontario or Trudeau at the federal level, including education support workers in 2022, West Coast dockers in 2023, and rail workers this year. They have also enforced concession-filled contracts throughout all economic sectors, cooperating in the creation of low-wage, precarious workers who are forced to rely with increasing frequency on food banks.



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